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**On the Coming of a Zoroastrian Messiah:  
A Middle Persian Poem on History and  
Apocalypticism in Early Medieval Islamic Iran**

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Zoroastrian Middle Persian literature includes a rich apocalyptic genre which may have influenced other traditions, specifically Christianity and Islam.<sup>1</sup> Among the many Zoroastrian Middle Persian and Persian texts, the shortest and in many ways most curious is entitled “On the Coming of the Wondrous King Wahrām” (*abar madan ī šāh wahrām ī war-zāwand*). As a token of respect to my teacher, Professor Amin Banani, I would like to translate and discuss the significance of this short Middle Persian poem on the coming of the messianic savior Wahrām / Bahrām. The poem not only exhibits religious motifs but also a historical dimension which is important for gauging the attitudes of the Zoroastrian population in seventh-, eighth-, and ninth-century Iran.

Indeed one of the most salient features of Zoroastrian-Islamic interaction is the borrowing of apocalyptic motifs and ideas from the former by the latter. While many scholars have discussed the often-mentioned influence, the mechanism by which Zoroastrian apocalyptic ideas have made the transition to the Islamic tradition has rarely been discussed. I would like to suggest that early Islamic messianic movements such as those instigated by Abu Muslim, Sindbad, and Babak Khorramdīn made it possible for Zoroastrian ideas to make the leap into what may be called “populist” Islam. This transfer of ideas was only made possible

through Gnosticism which was able to syncretise such notions among the Iranian and Arab masses, as it had done earlier between the Hellenic and the Iranian world.

Zoroastrianism has no shortage of messianic figures, as the followers of that faith in ancient Iran faced many disasters which shook their lives and shaped their views of history. Alexander the Great's conquest in the fourth century BCE and the Arab Muslim conquest in the seventh century CE made a deep impression on Zoroastrian Middle Persian writing, much of it contained in its apocalyptic genre. The antiquity of the Zoroastrian apocalypticism is much debated,<sup>2</sup> but, as I have tried to show elsewhere, the structure of the Zoroastrian apocalyptic tradition betrays its originality and its connection to the Indo-European notions of the end when great calamities take place.<sup>3</sup> J. Alexander has noted that apocalyptic literature can give clues to a community's reaction to and judgments regarding historical events.<sup>4</sup> The Zoroastrian Middle Persian and Persian apocalyptic texts exactly tell us how the followers of the good religion reacted to foreign conquerors and the calamities to the religious (Achaemenid period) and sectarian (post-Sasanian period) movements.

The calamities which cause the insertion of historical episodes into the apocalyptic texts appear mainly because of Alexander the Great's conquest of the Achaemenid Empire, the Arab Muslim conquest, and the early Irano-Islamic sectarian movements.<sup>5</sup> These calamities naturally had repercussions that went beyond the militaristic and physical responses, especially after the invading armies had won and conquered the empire(s). In the case of Alexander's conquest, S.K. Eddy has noted that the Persian resistance came from the aristocratic and landholding military and religious classes.<sup>6</sup> I tend to think that after the battle, the elite cooperated with the Greek victors in many ways, and resistance, if any, took place in the intellectual and religious sphere. This means it was the Mages and their memory that created the demonization of Alexander the Great as famously expressed in Middle Persian texts as *gizistak aleksandar*, the "accursed Alexander." But interestingly, as G. Schoeler has discussed, what was mostly preserved by the Mages was not a memory of the Achaemenid dynasty, but rather the loss of religion.<sup>7</sup> It is only later in the Sasanian period that Alexander is used as one of the important figures of mischief and plays a part in Sasanian historical memory.<sup>8</sup>

As for the Arab Muslim conquest, this event has been seen as a great turning point in the Jewish, Christian and the Zoroastrian traditions.<sup>9</sup> In the case of Zoroastrian apocalyptic thought there are many details which need clarification. One has to separate, as much as possible, the religious from the historical, because they are couched in the mytho-religious tradition of Zoroastrianism and in many instances they converge. An example in this regard can be the figure of Wahrām ī Warzāwand (Wahrām the Wondrous) who exhibits divine, apocalyptic, messianic, and historical characteristics. While the divine and apocalyptic character of Wahrām can be deciphered, the historical – messianic aspect appears to be more complex.

In terms of his divine attributes, Wahrām ī Warzāwand shares similarities with the Zoroastrian *yazata* (Avestan) Vərəθraϥna in *Yašt* XIV whose function is to be the deity of offensive victory. Wahrām in *Yašt* XIV is invoked to defeat the enemy and aid the Mazda-worshippers/Zoroastrians, but his sheer brute strength and other aspects connect him to pre-Zoroastrian and Indo-Iranian warrior deities.<sup>10</sup> On the other hand, his apocalyptic function is well attested in texts such as the Middle Persian *Zand ī Wahman Yasn* which has been studied in detail by C.G. Cereti. There he has the title of *kay* and has a martial function (*ZWY* VII.7):

*ōy kay ka sīh-sālag bawēd (hād būd \*kē āwām guft)  
pad amar drafš spāh ī hindūg ud \*čīnīg ul-grift-drafš  
hēnd (čē drafš ul firēnd), abrāstag-drafš hēnd ud  
abrāstag-zēn*

When that *kay* will be thirty years old (that is, there was one who said the time), an army of Hindūg and Čīnīg with numberless flags, will have upheld banners (because they will hold the banners up), will have raised banners and raised arms.<sup>11</sup>

In another section his messianic characteristics becomes more clear (*ZWY* VIII.1-4):

*ān ī wahrām ī warzāwand rāy paydāg kū pad purr-  
xwarrahīh frāz rasēd ud wistaxm frāz bandēd pad  
gāh ī mowbedān \*mowbed ud gāh ī wizurd ī rāst ī  
dēn gumārd abāz wirāyēd ēn ērān dehān ī man ohr-  
mazd dād ud āz ud niyāz ud kēn ud xēšm ud waran ud*

*arešk ud druwandīh az gēhān be nirfsēd ud gurg  
āwām be šawēd ud mēš āwām andar āyēd ud ādur ī  
farrbay ud ādur ī gušnasp ud ādur ī burzēnmihr abāz  
ō gāh ī xwēš nišānēnd ud ēsm ud bōy dādīhā be da-  
hēnd ud star dud abē-ōš hawēd gannāg mēnōg (ī)  
druwand abāg dēwān ud tom-tōhmagān*

About the Powerful Wahrām it is revealed that he will arrive in fullness of *xwarrah* and will appoint *Wistaxm* to the dignity of *mowbedān mowbed* and, having entrusted (him) the authentic and true role of the religion, he will rearrange these *Ērānian* lands which I, Ohrmazd, have created. And greed, need, hate, wrath, lust, envy, and unrighteousness will disappear from the world. The era of the wolf will pass away and the year of the sheep will arrive. And they will seat the *Ādur Farrbay*, the *Ādur Gušnasp* and *Ādur Burzēnmihr* back in their own places and duly feed them firewood and incense. And the evil *Gannāg Mēnōg*, together with the *dēws* and those of obscure stock, will be stunned and unconscious.<sup>12</sup>

It is this messianic activity that has conjoined itself with the historical figures/kings of the late antique Iran. K. Czeglédy first suggested that Wahrām ī Warzāwand should be identified with the rebel Wahrām ī Čōbīn who defeated the Turks and brought the empire glory and security on its eastern frontier. While he retreated to the East for being unable to withstand the advancing army of king Kusro II/Xusrō II, his disappearance led to a scenario in which it was hoped by his followers that one day he would return in a messianic fashion.<sup>13</sup> But there is another historical figure who may be considered as one that not only is seen in the apocalyptic texts as the savior but who is also mentioned in other Middle Persian texts.

When the last Sasanian king, Yazdgerd III, was retreating to the East, his sons traveled further East asking the Chinese emperor, Gaozong, to aid them in their battle against the Arab Muslims. Pērōz, the elder son of Yazdgerd III established a kingdom called the "Persian Area Command" (*Bosi dudufu*) at Sīstān, stationed at Zaranj between 658 and 663 CE. He was recognized as the legitimate king of Iran by the Chinese,<sup>14</sup> but, as historical sources indicate, by 674-675 CE he left for the Chinese capital, probably because of further Arab Muslim victories.<sup>15</sup> He died in

around 679 CE and his son Narseh was placed on the throne of Iran in exile. Pērōz has been commemorated by a stone statue that is still in existence at the entrance of the mausoleum of Gaozong and which bears the inscription:

Pērōz, King of Persia, Grand General of the  
Right  
Courageous Guard and Commander-in-  
Chief of Persia.<sup>16</sup>

There the family of Sāsān kept its royal status and its members became military generals and had temples built at Tunhuang (sha-chou), Wu-wei (Liang-chou), Ch'ang-an (founded in 631 CE) and at Loyang. They lived along with other Persians who had been in China for commercial activity or who had fled their ancestral land as a result of the Arab Muslim conquest.<sup>17</sup> The other son of Yazdgerd III, Wahrām (Aluohan in Chinese sources), attempted to recapture the lost territories from the Arab Muslims. C.G. Cereti in a seminal article on this figure has shown that the poem we are dealing with here is probably related to the activity of this son of Yazdgerd III who died in 710 CE.<sup>18</sup> Thus, we have the incorporation of three different strands of divine and historical figures into one being presented to us in a poem in the early Islamic period, as Wahrām died in the eight century CE. This piece of evidence also pushes the date of the poem to the post-Sasanian period.

In terms of the structure and style the poem can be considered basically a *qasideh* of twelve syllables (mostly), which suggests that it was composed probably at the formative period of classical Persian poetry. Thus, at the earliest it could be assigned to the tenth century CE. A Middle Persian poem with this style is unique in the surviving Middle Persian literature. In terms of its vocabulary it also has some unique and interesting words such as *mazgit* (Arabic: *masjid*) and *gazīdag* (Arabic: *jizya*). While written in the Pahlavi script, the Middle Persian poem considered here shows such strong classical Persian affinity in vocabulary, rhythm, and structure that it could be thought of as early Classical Persian poetry in the Pahlavi script.

The Pahlavi text of the poem, which does not carry a title, was published by J.D.M. Jamasp-Asana along with other texts belonging to the MK codex.<sup>19</sup> The poem has been translated into English by H.W. Bailey,<sup>20</sup> J.C. Tavadia,<sup>21</sup> F. de Blois,<sup>22</sup> and into

Persian by M.-T. Bahar,<sup>23</sup> S. Hedayat,<sup>24</sup> Orian,<sup>25</sup> M. Bahar,<sup>26</sup> and B. Gheybi.<sup>27</sup> Each of these scholars has given different readings of the problematic words and the construction of the poem. Below, I have transcribed and annotated the poem so as to provide an improved reading of it.

*pad nām ī yazdān*

ka bawād ka payg-ē āyēd az hindūgān  
 \*kū mad ān šāh-wahrām az dudag (ī) kayān  
 \*kū pīl hast hazār abar sarān sar hast pīlbān  
 \*kū ārāstag drafš dārēd pad ēwēn ī husrawān  
 pēš (ī) laškar barēnd pad spāh-sālārān  
 mard-ē basīl<sup>28</sup> abāyēd kardan zīrak targumān  
 \*kū šawēd be gōwēd pad hindūgān  
 \*kū amā čē dīd az dast<sup>29</sup> ī tāzīgān  
 abar ēk grōh<sup>30</sup> dēn nizār kard ud be ōzad šāhān  
 šāh ī amā ud az ēr awēšān  
 čiyōn dēw <ud> dēn dārēnd čiyōn sag xwarēnd nān  
 be stad hēnd padixšāyīh az husrawān  
 nē pad hunar nē pad mardīh  
 bē pad afsōs ud riyahrīh  
 be stad hēnd kunand pad \*stambag az mardōmān  
 zan ud xwāstagīhā ī šīrēn bāy (ud) bōstān  
 gazīdag abar nihād hēnd be baxt hēnd abar sarān  
 abāz aslīg<sup>31</sup> xwāst hēnd sāk ī garān  
 be nīgar ka čand wad abgand ān druz pad ēn gēhān  
 kū nēst wattar az ōy \*andar gēhān  
 az amā be āyēd ān šāh-wahrām ī warzāwand az dudag ī kayān  
 pas be āwarēm kēn ī tāzīgān  
 čiyōn rōtastahm āward sad<sup>32</sup> kēn ī \*siyāwaxšān<sup>33</sup>  
 mazgītīhā frōd hilēm be nišānēm ātaxšān  
 uzdešzārīhā be kanēm ud pāk kunēm az gēhān  
 tā wany šawēnd druz wišūdagān az ēn gēhān  
 frazāft pad drōd (ud) šādīh

*In the name of Yazdān*

When will it be when a messenger comes from the India,<sup>34</sup>  
 (to say) that King Wahrām from the lineage of the Kayanids has  
 arrived,

that there are a thousand elephants, over their heads are elephant-  
 drivers,  
 that has an adorned flag in the manner of the renowned kings,<sup>35</sup>  
 they will lead the army as army leaders,  
 a dispatch must be sent, a clever interpreter,  
 when he goes he would tell the Indians,  
 what we saw at the hand of the Arabs,  
 with one troop (they) weakened the religion and killed the kings,  
 (they have killed) our king and among those Iranians,  
 their religion is in the manner of the demons, they eat bread like  
 the dogs  
 they took sovereignty from the renowned kings,  
 not by skill, not by manliness,  
 but through mockery and scorn,  
 through oppressiveness, they took from the people,  
 women and sweet property, gardens and orchards,  
 they have placed poll-tax, divided it over the heads,  
 again they have sought the cloth<sup>36</sup> (and) heavy tribute,  
 behold how much evil that demon has cast in this world,  
 there is no more evil than they in the world,  
 among us will arrive that king Wahrām the Wondrous from the  
 lineage of the Kayanids,  
 then we will bring revenge on the Arabs,  
 in the manner which Rostam brought a hundred revenge of Siy-  
 āwash,  
 we will destroy the mosques, establish fires,  
 we will raze idol-temples and blot them from the world,  
 till evil gets destroyed, the daevic creatures from the world,  
 finished with salutations and happiness.

*Notes and Bibliography:*

<sup>1</sup> For a survey of Zoroastrian apocalyptic literature see H.G. Kippenberg, "Die Geschichte der mittelpersischen apokalyptischen Traditionen," *Studia Iranica*, 7 (1978): 49-80.

<sup>2</sup> M. Boyce, "On the Antiquity of Zoroastrian apocalypticism," *Bulletin of School of Oriental and African Studies* XLVII: 1 (1984): 57-75; contra see Ph. Gignoux, "L'Apocalyphe iranienne est-elle vraiment la source d'autres apocalypses?," *Acta Antiqua Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 31 (1988): 67-78.

- <sup>3</sup> T. Daryae, "The Indo-European Roots of the Zoroastrian Apocalypticism," *The Classical Bulletin* 83: 2 (2007): 203-213.
- <sup>4</sup> J. Alexander, "Medieval Apocalypse as Historical Sources," *The American Historical Review* LXXIII: 4 (1968), 998.
- <sup>5</sup> T. Daryae, "Apocalypse Now: Zoroastrian Reflections on Early Islamic Centuries," *Medieval Encounters* 4: 3 (1998): 188-202; T. Daryae, "A Historical Episode in the Zoroastrian Apocalyptic Tradition: The Romans, the Abbasids, and the Khorramdēns," in T. Daryae and M. Omidsalar, eds., *The Spirit of Wisdom, Essays in Memory of Ahmad Tafazzoli* (Costa Mesa, Cal.: Mazda Publishers, 2004), 64-76.
- <sup>6</sup> S.K. Eddy, *The King is Dead: Studies in the Near Eastern Resistance to Hellenism, 334-31 B.C.* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1961), 37.
- <sup>7</sup> G. Schoeler, "Die 'Lücke' in der nationalen Tradition Irans," *Deutscher Orientalistentag* 26 (1998), 338.
- <sup>8</sup> T. Daryae, "Alexander and Middle Persian Literature," *Electrum* 12 (2007): 89-97.
- <sup>9</sup> For a valuable survey see Robert G. Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It: A Survey and Evaluation of Christian, Jewish and Zoroastrian Writings on Early Islam* (Princeton: Darwin Press, 1997).
- <sup>10</sup> The classical work on this deity is E. Benveniste and L. Renou, *Vrtra et Vrthragna*, Paris, 1934.
- <sup>11</sup> C.G. Cereti, *The Zand ī Wahman Yasn, A Zoroastrian Apocalypse, VII.7* (Rome, 1995), 162.
- <sup>12</sup> ZWY, VIII.1-5.
- <sup>13</sup> K. Czeglédy, "Bahrām Čōbīn and the Persian Apocalyptic Literature," *Acta Orientalia Academiae Scientiarum Hung.* VIII, Fasc. 1 (1958), 39.
- <sup>14</sup> J. Harmatta, "The Middle Persian-Chinese Bilingual Inscription from Hsian and the Chinese-Sāsānian Relations," *La Persia nel Medioevo*, Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei (Rome, 1971), 374.
- <sup>15</sup> A. Forte, "On the Identity of Aluohan (616-710): A Persian Aristocrat at the Chinese Court," *La Persia e l'Asia Centrale da Alessandro al X secolo*, Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei (Rome, 1996), 190.
- <sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 191.
- <sup>17</sup> For the latest study of the Sasanians in the East see M. Compareti, "The Last Sasanians in China," *Eurasian Studies* II: 2 (2003): 197-213.
- <sup>18</sup> C. G. Cereti, "Again on Wahrām ī Warzāwand," *La Persia e l'Asia Centrale da Alessandro al X secolo*, Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei (Rome, 1996), 629-639.
- <sup>19</sup> J.D.M. Jamasp-Asana, *Pahlavi Texts* (Bombay, 1897-1913), 160-161.

- <sup>20</sup> H.W. Bailey, *Zoroastrian Problems in the Ninth-Century Books* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1948), 195-196.
- <sup>21</sup> J.C. Tavadia, "A Rhymed Ballad in Pahlavi," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 87 (1955): 29-36.
- <sup>22</sup> F. de Blois, "A Persian Poem Lamenting the Arab Conquest," in C. Hillenbrand, ed., *Studies in honour of Clifford Edmund Bosworth* (Leiden, 2000), 82-95.
- <sup>23</sup> M.-T. Bahar, "Yek qasideh-ye Pahlavi," *Sokhan* 2 (1324): 577-581, reprinted in *Tarjomeh-ye chand matn-e Pahlavi*, ed. M. Golbon (Tehran: Sepehr, 1347/1968), 131-141.
- <sup>24</sup> S. Hedayat, "Amadan-e Shah Bahram-e varjavand," *Sokhan* 2 (1324), 540.
- <sup>25</sup> S. Orian, *Motun-e Pahlavi* (Tehran, 1371/1992), 190-191.
- <sup>26</sup> M. Bahar, *Pazhuheshi dar asatir-e Iran*, ed. K. Mazdapour (Tehran: Tus, 1375), 198-199.
- <sup>27</sup> B. Gheybi, *Amadan-e shah bahram-e varjavand* (Bielefeld: Nemudar, 1372).
- <sup>28</sup> Bailey reads the word as Arabic *bashir*; Bahar correctly suggests *basil* ("send,"); see Bahar, "Yek qasideh-ye Pahlavi," 134-135.
- <sup>29</sup> There are two interpretations, one emending the word to *dast* "hand" (as mentioned in Bailey, *Zoroastrian Problems*, 195, and Gheybi, *Amadan-e shah bahram*, 8); or as it is written *dasht* "plain" (in Bahar, "Yek qasideh-ye Pahlavi," 135). Bahar suggests that the reading *dast* would only appear in classical Persian and it would be late, considering the poem is in Middle Persian. But it is indeed a late poem and so the construction *az dast* "from the hands" is acceptable.
- <sup>30</sup> Here *groh* does not stand for "group" or "crowd," but rather "troop"; see H.S. Nyberg, *A Manual of Pahlavi*, Part II (Wiesbaden: O. Harrassowitz, 1974), 85.
- <sup>31</sup> Bailey (*Zoroastrian Problems*, 195) takes it as *aslīg* "principal," while Tavadia ("A Rhymed Ballad in Pahlavi," 36) suggests *aslī* "well bred." I think only Bahar has given the most plausible solution, that is, to take the word as a yellow cloth ('*asali*- or honey colored) which was sowed on the garment of the Zoroastrians. It is related that during the reign of the Caliph Mutawakkil it was ordered that the *dhimmis* wear the '*asali*'; see *Borhan-e Qate'*, ed. M. Mo'in, 5 vols. (Tehran: Ebn Sina, 1342/1963), 3: 1374.
- <sup>32</sup> Bailey (*Zoroastrian Problems*, 196) reads the word as "club," but again Bahar ("Yek qasideh-ye Pahlavi," 138-139) seems to be right to read it as the number 100.
- <sup>33</sup> It was S. Kiya who emended the word to *Siyāwaxšān* (1357) which is quoted by Gheybi (*Amadan-e shah bahram*, 7, ft. 10). This seems most likely as in the *Tarikh-e Sistan* it is said that Rostam went to Turkestan

to revenge the death of Siyāwaxš. See *Tarikh-e Sistan*, ed. M.-T. Bahar (Tehran: Zovvar, 1314), 7.

<sup>34</sup> While in Middle Persian *hīnūgān* would appear to be an adjectival plural, in classical Persian it can mean the land (*hindūvān*) as attested in *Mojmal al-tavarikh va al-qesas*, ed. M.-T. Bahar (Tehran: Khavar, 1318/1939), 105. It should also be noted that Hindustān was also thought to include eastern Afghanistan; see Bahar, ed., *Mojmal al-tavarikh*, 198, note. 2. In the *Bundahišn*, XXXIII.32, Wahrām is said to come from Kāwulestān / Kabulistān; see F. Pakzad, *Bundahiš: Zoroastri-sche Kosmogonie und Kosmologie*, Band I (Tehran, 2005), 370.

<sup>35</sup> Here again *husrawān* carries the Classical Persian meaning of “kings” or famous kings.

<sup>36</sup> This is a reference to the cloth worn by the religious minorities as ordered by the Caliph in the Abbasid period.

### 3.

## A Primary Armenian Source on Land Tenure in the Khanate of Iravan (Erevan) from the 16<sup>th</sup> to the 18<sup>th</sup> Centuries

George Bournoutian

The emergence of the theocratic Safavid Shi'a state in 1501 challenged the religious and political leadership of the Sunni Ottomans, who saw themselves, and were viewed by many, as the caliphs of the Muslim world. The spread of Safavid ideology into eastern Anatolia and the capture of Baghdad in 1508 by Iranian forces did not meet much resistance, however. The sons of Sultan Bayazid II were feuding over the succession and Twelver Shi'i propaganda had already found many adherents among the Turkmen of eastern Anatolia. However, the Ottomans could not ignore the threat of Iranian attacks into Mesopotamia or Anatolia for long. Therefore, after prevailing over his brothers, the new sultan, Selim I, decided to challenge the leader of the Iranian Shi'ites, Shah Isma'il, who called Imam 'Ali a manifestation of God and himself a descendant of that Imam. The battle of Chaldiran on August 23, 1514 witnessed the total defeat of the Iranian army. Two weeks later, Selim took Tabriz, the capital of Isma'il, but had to withdraw a week later, when his officers refused to continue the campaign in winter.

The next Safavid shah, Tahmasp, had to face the great Ottoman sultan, Suleyman, who began a new campaign against Iran in 1534, occupied Tabriz and recaptured Baghdad. Once again, the Ottoman withdrawal allowed the Safavids to retake much of their lost territory. In 1548, Suleyman, encouraged by the defec-





Amin Banani

Photo by Amir Kojoory

# Converging Zones

Persian Literary Tradition  
and the Writing of History

Studies in Honor of  
Amin Banani

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